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Briefing Note

On the Link between Climate Change and Forced Migration: The Impact of Climate Change in the Arctic and Global South

An Analysis in the Context of Bangladesh

Afroja Khanam

Introduction

Finland is now the Chair of the Arctic Council for the 2017–2019 period and aiming to highlight the Paris Agreement within Arctic cooperation on climate change and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). During its chairmanship, Finland takes up a broad range of issue areas encompassing climate change mitigation and adaptation as well as sustainable development. There are certain priority areas of concentration: environmental protection, meteorological cooperation, connectivity and education (Finland MFA, 2017). In short, climate change stands out as the main focus – it is a global phenomenon and its impacts are visible everywhere, including the Arctic and also in the Global South. According to many researchers, climate change brings a lot of challenges in the Arctic, with various environmental impacts and implications to people's livelihoods and economic activities such as forestry, fishing and reindeer herding (AACA, 2017). At the same time, climate change also has its adverse effect on the Global South. Most of the low-lying countries are vulnerable due to the impacts of climate change. Bangladesh, as a country that is already vulnerable to and affected every year by many different types of environmental disasters, is particularly exposed to climate change and accompanying societal security threats. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2012 report, Bangladesh is among the countries estimated to lose the largest amount of cultivated land due to environmental and climate changes (IPCC, 2012). Another data shows that 30 million people are expected to be displaced

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due to Bangladesh losing 17% of its land if global sea levels rise by one metre. While the Arctic has some connections with South Asia and South-East Asia, as China, India and Singapore have become Observer states in the Arctic Council, Bangladesh is not among the Observer states although it is one of the most vulnerable countries with regards to global warming.

I have lived in Rovaniemi for a few years now, observing discussions on Arctic governance and in particular on climate change in the Arctic. What strikes me as an outside observer is that these debates are often disconnected from the broader global context. While there is increasingly more emphasis on the "global Arctic", the Arctic remains to a great extent discursively isolated in terms of governance, politics and pondering about its future. My aim in this commentary is to highlight the global context that, I believe, may prove crucial for the long term trajectories of human development in the Circumpolar North. I use Bangladesh as an example as this is the context that I am the most familiar with. Against this backdrop, this Briefing Note analyses, firstly, how climate change is affecting the Global South; here exemplified with the case of Bangladesh. Secondly, it analyses how climate change is contributing to increasing levels of forced migration. Discussing in greater detail the predicament of climate migrants in Bangladesh will also serve to highlight the critical human dimension to the discussion in this briefing note. Thirdly, it explains why and how more integrated and combined policy/action is required in order to combat these problems along with the existing policies.

The Context of Bangladesh

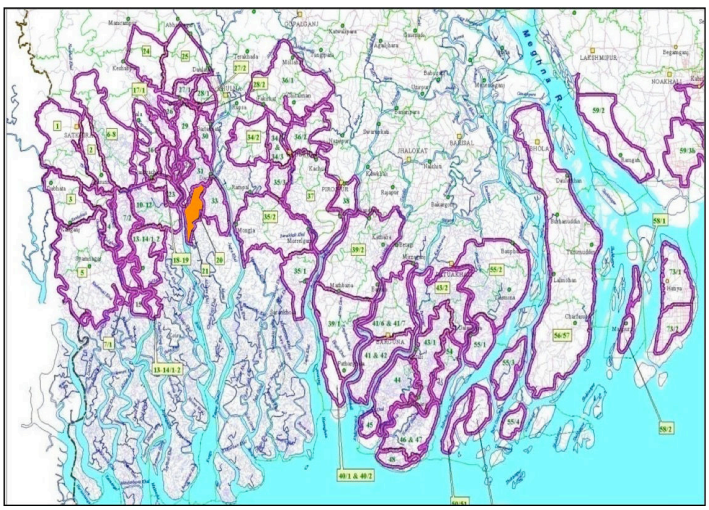
Figure 1: Map of Bangladesh (Rangpur and Sylhet divisions are not indicated in this map). Source: The United Nations, 2004

Geographically, Bangladesh is one of the environmental-disaster-prone countries in South Asia. Currently, its total population is almost 186 million (World Population Review, 2017). The coastal divisions, such as Barisal, Khulna and Chittagong, are the most vulnerable parts of the country with regard to cyclonic flood and storm surge due to its location (Karim & Mimura, 2008).

The coastal areas, which are less protected low-lying lands, are highly populated. Every year, Bangladesh experiences several tropical cyclones, storm surges, coastal erosion, floods and droughts which cause loss of thousands of lives and significant damage to property. Due to its geographical location, most of the climatic events that the country faces, such as cyclones and storms, originate from the South; from the Bay of Bengal and the adjacent North Indian Ocean (A. Ali, 2004). All environmental disasters in Bangladesh are complicated due to its large population and high density of people living in the affected areas. The country suffers from many serious problems, such as shortage of land to

accommodate its population, shortage of food, lack of clean drinking water, high level of illiteracy, and so on (A. Ali, 2004; Karim & Mimura, 2008). On top of that, Bangladesh is now predicted as one of the most vulnerable countries due to climate change and its impacts (Asaduzzaman, 2016; IPCC, 2012). As the country is facing more storm surges than ever before, the number of deaths resulting from natural disasters is continuously growing (A. Ali, 1999; A. Ali, 2004; Asaduzzaman, 2016). According to data which is modified from A. Ali (1999), approximately 31,279 people died in 1965 (11 May and 31 May); 500,000 people in 1970; 11,069 people in 1985; 5,708 people in 1988; and 138,000 people in 1991 due to natural disasters in Bangladesh. These high numbers of causalities, reaching hundreds of thousands during major cyclones and storms over the last 50 years, paint a clear picture of intensity and severity of these events. Therefore, these numbers provide a clear picture of the intensity and severity of cyclones and storms. They also result in enormous economic impacts through infrastructural damage that affects livelihoods (MoEF, 2008). Therefore, many places in Bangladesh face large scale population displacement, which can be defined as environmentally forced migration (Siddiqui, 2003; Siddiqui, 2012).

Figure 2: The Coastal Part of Bangladesh



Source: beahrselp.berkeley.edu

As already mentioned, due to the global warming the Arctic would be contributing significantly to sea-level rise. According to the AMAP assessment (2017), if the greenhouse gas emissions continue at current rates, the sea-level would rise by 25 centimetres between 2006 and 2100, which means that many low lying countries would become submerged. The increased emissions of greenhouse gases are extensively contributing to changes to the Arctic's sensitive climate. Moreover, the yearly updated data shows that it becomes evidently clear that the Arctic environment, familiar for previous generations, is being replaced by a warmer, wetter, and more inconstant environment. All these transformations have extremely serious impacts on people, resources and ecosystems globally (AMAP, 2017). It is adversely affecting also the Global South including Bangladesh as one of the low-lying countries.

As an impact of these catastrophes, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has increased dramatically during the past two decades in many South Asian Countries. Consequently, these countries have witnessed a rapid growth in the number of slums and shanty towns. These

developments concern also Bangladesh, where a growing number of people are becoming displaced due to climate change related triggers and causes, such as floods, storm surges, riverbank erosion, sea level rise, high temperatures, lack of drinkable water, increasing salinity of land, and changes in cultivation patterns (Goodbred et al., 2012; International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2010). According to a study conducted by Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, over 16 million people in Bangladesh will become internally displaced due to climate change induced natural catastrophes by the year 2050 (Siddiqui & Mahmood, 2015).

In Bangladesh, millions of people have moved to the capital city Dhaka from other parts of the country due to various reasons, such as displacement caused by river erosion, natural disasters and development projects, poverty and loss of livelihoods – or a combination of these and other factors. Dhaka, a megacity with over 16 million residents, continues to expand rapidly. According to the World Bank, already half of the population of Dhaka lives in slums. Between 1996 and 2005, the number of slum dwellers more than doubled from 1.5 to 3.4 million (Islam, 2006).

Many of these people can be considered either climate migrants or climate refugees (Goodbred et al., 2012; Walsham, 2010), and their situation remains dire and requiring urgent response at national and international levels. Currently, most climate refugees migrate internally within their home countries, but it has been estimated that in the future millions of Bangladeshi people affected by climate change will migrate also abroad (Siddiqui & Mahmood, 2015). As climate change induced displacement will also lead to international impacts beyond Bangladesh, including Europe and the Arctic region, it is necessary to address it as a phenomenon on a global level. To be able to address and tackle various social, political, economic and environmental problems from a broader and collective perspective, a holistic and nuanced understanding of climate change related displacement must be developed. Where the aim is to create common strategies, integrated policies and practical solutions for combatting climate change-related complex challenges, it is of utmost importance to combine knowledge and expertise from the countries of the Global South, such as Bangladesh, and the countries of the Arctic region. It is necessary to place our climate change actions at national and regional levels within a global and trans-regional context, rather than narrow down policy deliberations to one region and its specific challenges, excluding the grave developments taking place elsewhere.

At the same time, addressing serious social problems and injustices caused by climate change induced displacement locally in the Global South becomes also more important. Several studies have shown that despite the United Nation's Guiding Principles on internal displacement, when marginalized and poor people are displaced, they are not usually offered compensation or resettlement. In shanty towns, displaced people confront serious problems, such as lack of food, water, shelter, healthcare and education, as well as unemployment and police repression. Many studies have shown that women are more vulnerable to climate changes and its impact on their health, psychology and security (Bunce, Ford, Harper, Edge, & IHACC Research Team, 2016; Hossain & Punam, 2016; Sultana, 2014). In camps and resettlement colonies, women also often face gender-based violence and sexual abuse, and are in high risk of being trafficked (Basu, 2011; Ghimire, 2011). In this way, their human rights are being constantly violated (Hossain & Punam, 2016). Moreover, many IDPs living in slums are under the constant threat of being displaced again as slums are often evicted due to the continuously rising value of land in metropolitan cities (Jha,

2011). The effects are far greater than material impacts: displacement always represents "a wider loss of cultural autonomy, knowledge and power" (Baviskar, 2004; Chatterjee, 2004).

Besides the everyday struggles described above, internally displaced people and migrants are often exposed to political violence and dependence on a given political party (Suykens & Islam, 2013; Suykens, 2015; Suykens & Islam, 2015). A recent research shows that the level of political violence in Bangladesh has increased drastically from 2002 to 2013 in Bangladesh. In 2002, the total number of events including political violence was 668, whereas it was 14,187 in 2013 (Suykens & Islam, 2015).

The Global Arctic, the Global South and Climate Change

There is no immediate solution to climate change. As climate change and its impacts have taken a long time to become more visible, the processes of combatting them will also require time. For this to happen, a trans-regional approach is required to take action effectively. The time has now come to combine actions taken in the Arctic and in the Global South. In order to combat climate change and prevent forced migration at least the following steps can be taken:

- There should be a common working ground at the trans-regional or inter-regional level. Also, policies and approaches should be adapted trans-regionally or inter-regionally. The pattern should be multidisciplinary and multi-level. If the regions can take into account the situation in the other parts of the world then it would be more effective and timely.
- Traditional knowledge could be useful in this regard. It must include Indigenous knowledge including traditional knowledge from the Arctic region and Indigenous knowledge from the Global South.
- Access to updated knowledge is a must for this purpose. There is a huge gap of information between the Arctic and the South. Informing and updating the present state of climate change and its possible impacts would make others aware of the situation. When people from the Global South and Global North would have better understanding regarding the situation, they would realize the urgency of the issue. Thus, it will be helpful to generate new ideas for the purpose of mitigation.
- Adaptation would be helpful to reduce the impact. Adaptation strategies should be developed and implemented both individually and jointly. Vulnerability assessments should be conducted from different viewpoints and by building on knowledge and perspectives from multiple disciplines. This requires an integrated approach. From the perspective of climate justice it can be considered unfair while Bangladesh is a minimal contributor to the greenhouse gas emissions which result in global climate change, it is among the countries that suffer the most from the effects of climate change (see Ali, 2004). When compared to the Arctic Countries, the difference is that while they also suffer from effects of climate change, they are, at the same time, among the biggest emitters.

Finally, the Arctic Council or other Arctic regional forums should develop enhanced governance systems and mechanisms. They should be rather inclusive and comprehensive and bring also the concerns of non-Arctic regions to the discussions taking place in the Arctic forums. Currently, Arctic regions are closely connected between themselves through various platforms. From the perspective of the Global South the problem is that the existing platforms such as the Arctic Council are very focused on the region itself, and not enough attention is paid to policies that

would take into account other parts of the world. Broadening the scope is crucial but may prove to be challenging as it seems to be difficult to adopt even a coherent Arctic policy, as the ongoing debates demonstrate.

The same is true of the Arctic policies of such polities as the European Union. According to some research, there is no coherent policy for the Arctic region itself; including in the economic and political sectors (Stepien, 2014; Stepien & Raspotnik, 2015). This shows that it is very difficult to adopt and implement an integrated policy. Nevertheless, there should be some platforms or organizations that would address these issues also from the perspective of the Global South and link them with the Arctic region. The aim should be to develop an overarching policy that comprehensively addresses the whole spectrum of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and links both regions together, which would help to combat and mitigate the adverse effects of climate change collectively. This is a complex question and it requires political will. However, without collaboration between the Arctic region and countries of the Global South, it will be impossible to address challenges related to climate change and its impacts more effectively, including the ongoing and rapidly increasing phenomenon of climate change-induced forced migration.

Conclusion

This Briefing Note addresses climate change in general with climate refugees from the Global South; more specifically from Bangladesh. Due to the ongoing 'refugee crisis'; forced migration has become an object of wide attention and public debate in Europe. At the same time, there seems to be a certain blindness to forced migration that takes place outside the borders of Europe. In Bangladesh, for example, millions of people are forced to migrate from rural areas to urban slums. While increasingly many of these 'climate refugees' migrate abroad, the country receives also a growing number of refugees itself. For example, during the last few years, over 300,000 Rohingyas have escaped ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and crossed the border to Bangladesh. It is high time for the Arctic region and Arctic governance related institutions, along with the EU, to develop a strong and common framework. If climate change is not tackled now comprehensively and collectively, the number of people migrating from Bangladesh and other countries will continue to grow substantially. Then, the question is, whether the Arctic countries are ready to accept more climate refugees in the future?

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